

THE RETURN  
by Mike Hopper

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE PRESENT

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Sam Timmings gazed through the window on the British Airways flight from Istanbul to Heathrow. Outside there was nothing but a blanket of white cloud which shrouded all below it. Almost an hour into the near four-hour flight, he could only hazard a guess as to where the plane was, that based on the map on his BA television screen.

Sam remained relaxed, even though events preceding the flight gave him every reason to be uptight.

Nobody back home in Liverpool had any advance warning of his arrival. How could they, given the circumstances?

He closed his eyes and allowed his mind to reflect on the past six years but most of all, how the nightmare had all begun...

## CHAPTER 2

### 2008

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Sam and his partner Abbie Tinkler were eating an evening meal together in their semi-detached home in Childwall, Liverpool. The couple had been together for two years and were blissfully content with their lot.

Sam worked in the insurance-banking industry at a large firm in the centre of Liverpool. It was fruitful employment. For her part, Abbie held a high position with a group of barristers, also in the city centre, and between the pair, the combined incomes made their lifestyle more than comfortable. This was reflected in the quality of their living accommodation. Childwall was a very middle-class area.

Their relationship was rock-solid, indeed sufficiently so for them to have touched on the notion of getting married and starting a family.

Neither Sam nor Abbie were especially sport-minded, but for some years he had been obsessed with cars and in particular rally-cross. He soon had Abbie hooked as well and two or three times a month, they'd head for rural Rossendale in East Lancashire to take part in rallies.

They became friendly with a guy their age called Harry Taggart, who owned a garage of sorts in the middle of that region and was involved in 'souping-up' old cars to take part in the cross-country run-arounds.

Sam would race with Abbie as his 'navigator', but she was no mean driver in her own right and often they swapped roles. To take part they paid a fee to Harry and usually took a Mini-Cooper of his which sounded more like a motor-bike.

They'd arrive back on Sunday evenings shattered from the thrills and exhilaration.

The only slight negative element to proceedings was Sam's job. He was not overly content with his lot at Harbinger-Balcan. He sensed at times that some of the financial activities sailed a bit too close to the wind for his liking, though he could never quite lay his finger on any possible skulduggery.

There was also a secondary issue in that, before he and Abbie got together, she had spent the best part of a year in a relationship with Emre Balcan, one of the partners in the firm. Indeed, it was through the company that she and Sam first met.

She called it a day with Emre some time before crossing paths with Sam at a function — completely independent of Harbinger-Balcan. There, the two hit it off almost from the start.

Within a few months, she'd moved into Sam's Childwall house and their romance had done nothing but thrive ever since. The consequence was that Sam's relationship with Emre was a touch frosty.

The big downside was that Sam had to travel quite a lot — it was a specific feature of his job; it was what he was paid to do. He hated being away from Abbie, even for a few days, and the feelings were mutual. Sometimes, he almost felt that Emre sent him away on spite.

As an escape from the intensity of his job, Sam engaged part-time with the Territorial Army. It might mean, in the case of an emergency, that he could be called up as part of the country's reserve force, but he'd always assumed that to be unlikely. From his own point of view, it meant he was physically strong and very fit.

As he and Abbie engaged in their evening meal, Sam was set to fly to Turkey the next day. It was expected that business would keep him there for about a week, though he could never be totally sure about dates.

There were regular visits to Turkey and it seemed it was always Sam who represented the company in that country. For the most part, he felt more like a glorified messenger, simply handing things over on a personal basis. Sometimes however, as on this trip, there were some protracted discussions to be undertaken, which meant the stay would be an extended one.

As always, before being separated, the night before would be very passionate and even though the time apart was never more than a few days, Abbie always got especially emotional and their love-making was all the more intense as a result.

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Sam arrived in Istanbul and was surprised on this occasion to find immigration and customs taking a particular interest in him — which was unusual. Nothing of note was said and eventually he left the airport and hailed a taxi.

It was not his first time dealing with these particular clients, and he knew his way around. But first he would check into his usual 5-star hotel.

Since Harbinger-Balcan was paying, the room was top of the range and he stayed at this particular place on every visit. He opened his case and took his suit out — he always travelled casually in sweater and jeans. Before changing, he rested his head on the pillow as his first meeting was still a few hours away.

What happened next was a complete shock. He was still dozing when two masked men entered the room, clearly in possession of a key-card. He was aware of a rag being placed over his face and that was it.

When he came round, he was in a cell. He had no idea where he was, but it certainly looked like a proper prison, not some makeshift affair.

The nightmare had only just started.

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Sam was in solitary confinement. The cell did have a wash-basin of sorts and a primitive toilet which comprised a hole in the floor. There was a hand-towel and a roll of toilet paper lying on a solitary wooden chair; no soap. His place of sleep was akin to a camp-bed.

A very small window high up did nothing more than tell him the difference between night and day in the outside world.

At first he assumed he'd soon receive somebody and be given an explanation. He felt sure the nightmare would only last hours, before being released.

The daylight hours passed tediously, during which time he was twice provided with tasteless food through a flap near the base of the cell door. Replacement towels and toilet paper were also passed through quite regularly, but not a word was spoken.

With nothing to do, Sam engaged in some basic exercise. The cell was about four yards by three, but part of that was taken up by his basic bunk-bed with a single blanket and pillow. Nevertheless, Sam determined to keep physically active.

It was after a couple of days of this same ritual, that Sam began to face up to the worst-case scenario. He racked his brain, but had no notion as to why he was being incarcerated. He forced a tiny bit of plaster from the wall and began to mark off the days in a way he'd seen done in the movies.

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After the imprisonment had run into weeks, there was a modest bonus when several books in English — all novels — were pushed through the flap. Again there was no explanation, though, if nothing else, they were an acknowledgement of his nationality.

In the months that followed, the only real change to anything came when a new batch of novels would appear. Sam had already read the previous ones several times over.

Had he been back home he'd have dismissed them all as rubbish, but given the circumstances, they were a lifeline to sanity. Mind, he had to smile at the sense of humour of whoever was controlling his captivity, when he found, within each batch, at least one book that could best be described as soft porn!

The storylines, while keeping his brain ticking over, occasionally took his mind back to Abbie. His frustration was exacerbated at the thought of what was happening to her.

Perhaps she'd given him up for dead. Then he considered that might be a good thing, as there was no sign whatsoever that a release was ever on the cards.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PRESENT

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The makeshift calendar on the wall told Sam that he was into the fourth month of his sixth year in captivity. Much of his UK past was blurring badly, despite his best efforts and determination to hold onto it — and his sanity.

His vision of Abbie was pretty well limited to their last few hours together but he was altogether struggling to recall her face and her loveliness.

He still did his sit-ups and press-ups and he had a circuit which he'd managed to sustain just about every day. There was nothing else to do.

His beard was several inches long, similarly his hair. He even forced a laugh sometimes at what he must look like.

And then it happened...

It was late morning and out of nowhere there came a sudden roaring noise and then a shaking. At first it was modest, but then the whole of the building began shuddering alarmingly. It was sustained for several seconds. There followed a repeat, this time a much more ferocious tremor and Sam could hear some crashing of masonry.

Straight away, he sensed it was an earthquake and was fearful for his very existence. But, as he lay underneath his bunk for protection, he asked himself what exactly was the quality of life he was seeking to protect.

Sam could not make out what happened next, but for sure part of his cell was collapsing and as bricks and mortar were falling all around, he realised that his modest bunk had been his life-saver.

An eerie silence descended and Sam emerged from under his bed. He could see that the area around his tiny cell window was wide open and sunshine of sorts was beaming through amidst millions of tiny dust particles.

He clambered over the pile of masonry and looked out into the open air. He was surprised that he was still alert enough to appreciate the moment.

He gazed at the world outside. He was a single floor up, but there was so much rubble around that he was able to clamber over it and down to ground level. As he struggled to orientate himself, he saw a few other figures with a similar intention to his.

Freedom.

He was in an open courtyard and a quick glance round told him that it was indeed a prison. Not all of it had collapsed during the tremor, just the part that he'd been holed up in!

There was no sign of controlling guards and Sam assumed that everyone had made a run for it. He wasn't going to waste time either and he was quickly out of the confines of the prison and into rough, open-ground with trees.

He'd had no idea what to expect, but as he looked around, there were wide tracts of open space, though with enough trees to provide a degree of cover. He could see urban dwellings in the distance, where mosques dotted the landscape. Beyond those were skyscrapers. His distant memories of Istanbul suggested he was on the outskirts of that city.

As he gathered his thoughts, Sam realised that his appearance must be quite startling and he asked himself what an escaped prisoner would look like to an ordinary civilian. He didn't have a prison uniform. Instead he still had on the same clothes he'd arrived in.

He walked steadily using the trees for cover and tried to remain calm. As he finally entered the outer reaches of the city, Sam could see that the 'quake had made people run for their lives and he wondered if he might have a chance to find something to help change his appearance.

He knew he ran the risk of being arrested for stealing, but there was a large amount of rubble and fallen masonry about.

All of a sudden, there was a further after-shock and what few people had ventured out, were once again scattering for their lives. Sam, for his part, had nowhere to go.

He wandered down what looked like a tourist street of sorts and glanced into one shop. It looked like a general store with a multitude of small items. It was empty and he slipped in through the open door. What were his most immediate needs?

Sam had no intention of looting the premises, but when he saw a pair of scissors and a few toiletries, he lifted them with glee. He even found a plastic bag by the counter. He tried to think on his feet for what might be fundamental items, and he grabbed a few chocolate bars. He knew time was of the essence.

He slipped out of the shop with his plastic bag and its contents worth a relative pittance, but nevertheless precious to him.

Without a penny to his name, Sam needed, as a priority, to find somewhere quiet where he could attempt to clean himself up. While he'd regularly rinsed his clothes through in prison, he'd never had any soap, so he reckoned he probably had a distinct stench about him!

He came across a building block which had the characteristic appearance of a public toilet. Would there be running water, he wondered?

His luck was in. The block, while smelly enough, had working taps and he set about liberally throwing water all over his head and upper-body. He savoured the smell of soap on his face and then began, as best he could, to lop off the six years' of growth on his head and face. There was a mirror of sorts, filthy with cracks aplenty, but with enough glass to provide him with a reflection of himself.

Half an hour later, he felt like a new man as he walked out of the public toilet. He was still dressed in the same sweater and jeans he'd arrived in more than six years ago and his training shoes were just about intact.

He'd retained some of his hair and beard, but they were so much shorter that he looked a totally different person. At least, he could hope he did not have the look of an obvious prisoner-at-large.

What next?